

# Study Guide to Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986)



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Many readers are surprised to hear Atwood's novel labeled science fiction, but it belongs squarely in the long tradition of near-future dystopias which has made up a large part of SF since the early 50s. SF need not involve technological innovation: it has been a long-standing principle that social change can provide the basis for SF just as well as technical change. *The Handmaid's Tale* is partly an extrapolation of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, attempting to imagine what kind of values might evolve if environmental pollution rendered most of the human race sterile. It is also the product of debates within the feminist movement in the 70s and early 80s. Atwood has been very much a part of that movement, but she has never been a mere mouthpiece for any group, always insisting on her individual perspectives. The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, the rise of the religious right, the election of Ronald Reagan, and many sorts of backlash (mostly hugely misinformed) against the women's movement led writers like Atwood to fear that the antifeminist tide could not only prevent further gains for women, but turn back the clock. Dystopias are a kind of thought experiment which isolates certain social trends and exaggerates them to make clear their most negative qualities. They are rarely intended as realistic predictions of a probable future, and it is pointless to criticize them on the grounds of implausibility. Atwood here examines some of the traditional attitudes that are embedded in the thinking of the religious right and which she finds particularly threatening.

But another social controversy also underlies this novel. During the early 80s a debate raged (and continues to rage, on a lower level) about feminist attitudes toward sexuality and pornography in particular. Outspoken feminists have taken all kinds of positions: that all erotica depicting women as sexual objects is demeaning, that pornography was bad though erotica can be good, that although most pornography is demeaning the protection of civil liberties is a greater good which requires the toleration of freedom for pornographers, however distasteful, even that such a thing as feminist pornography can and should be created.

The sub-theme of this tangled debate which seems to have particularly interested and alarmed Atwood is the tendency of some feminist anti-porn groups to ally themselves with religious anti-porn zealots who oppose the feminists on almost every other issue. The language of "protection of women" could slip from a demand for more freedom into a retreat from freedom, to a kind of neo-Victorianism. After all, it was the need to protect "good" women from sex that justified all manner of repression in the 19th century, including confining them to the home, barring them from participating in the arts, and voting. Contemporary Islamic women sometimes argue that assuming the veil and traditional all-enveloping clothing is aimed at dealing with sexual harassment and sexual objectification. The language is feminist, but the result can be deeply patriarchal, as in this novel.

Without some sense of the varying agendas of mid-20th-century feminists and the debates among those agendas this novel will not make much sense. Women who participated in the movement from the late sixties and early seventies responded to this novel strongly, often finding it extremely alarming. Younger women lacking the same background often found it baffling. Ask yourself as you read not whether events such as it depicts are likely to take place, but whether the attitudes and values it conveys are present in today's society.

Atwood's strong point is satire, often hilarious, often very pointed. Humor is in short supply in this novel, but it is a satire nonetheless. Atwood's love for language play (apparent in the anagram of her name she uses for her private business "O. W. Toad") is a major feature of the protagonist of this novel. Her jokes are dark and bitter, but they are pervasive.

There are numerous biblical references in the following notes. You should provide yourself with a Bible, preferably a King James Version, which is what Atwood uses most of the time. Or use a great searchable [Web Bible](#).

### **Epigraphs**

Genesis 30:1-3 is one of several passages that make clear that in patriarchal Hebrew times it was perfectly legitimate for a man to have sex and even beget children by his servants (slaves), particularly if his wife was infertile. It is unknown how widespread was the custom described here, of having the infertile wife embrace the fertile maidservant as she gave birth to symbolize that the baby is legally hers. Atwood extrapolates outrageously from this point, as is typical of dystopian writers: it is highly unlikely that the puritanical religious right would ever adopt the sexual practices depicted in this novel; but she is trying to argue that patriarchal traditions which value women only as fertility objects can be as demeaning as modern customs which value them as sex objects. She makes clear that this is a theoretical exercise designed to stimulate thought about social issues rather than a realistic portrait of a probable future by comparing herself to Jonathan Swift, who in *A Modest Proposal* highlighted the hard-heartedness of the English in allowing the Irish masses to starve by satirically proposing that they should be encouraged to eat their own children. It is not so obvious what the application of the third epigraph is to this novel. It seems to say that no one needs to forbid what is undesirable. Can you interpret it any further?

## **Section I: Night**

### **Chapter 1**

1. Read the first sentence. What can you tell about the period just from this sentence?
2. What is suggested by the fact that the immediate supervisors of the girls are women but these women are not allowed guns?
3. What is suggested by the fact that the girls have to read lips to learn each others' names?

## **Section II Shopping**

### **Chapter 2**

1. What is suggested by the statement: "they've removed anything you could tie a rope to?"
2. "Ladies in reduced circumstances" is a 19th-century expression usually applied to impoverished widows. How does the narrator pun on it?
3. In the gospels, Martha was one of two sisters. She devoted herself to housework while her sister Mary sat and listened to Jesus. What is the irony here?
4. What is suggested by the existence of "Colonies" where "Unwomen" live? What are the crimes the Marthas gossip about in their "private conversations"?

### **Chapter 3**

1. What would the Wives envy the Handmaids?
2. How is the wife described, and what can we discern about her from this description?

### **Chapter 4**

1. What power does the Handmaid have over men, powerless as she is? How traditional is this kind of power?

### **Chapter 5**

1. How are Ecowives different than other women of society?
2. Why is it ominous that the number of widows has diminished? Examine the passage that begins "Women were not protected then." This is the heart of the ideology that underlies the founding of Gilead. What is its essential rationale?
3. What is the Handmaidens' reaction to the pregnant woman?"
4. How are the Japanese women different from the women of Gilead? What do you think the point of the contrast is?

### **Chapter 6**

1. What is the function of the Wall?
2. Why have the doctors been executed?

## Section III: Night

### Chapter 7

1. Note the words: *Lie and lay. Date rape.* Explain how Atwood is using these words/phrases as puns, and how this affects tone.
2. What was the narrator's reaction as a little girl to her mother's participation in the burning of pornographic magazines? What relevance does this memory have to her present situation?
3. Note how the narrator states: "I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling... It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along." What can you guess about her meaning in these statements? How does this help build suspense in this narrative?

## Section IV: Waiting Room

### Chapter 8

1. What is "Gender Treachery?"
2. What is an "Unbaby"? How do the Ecowives feel about Handmaids? Why?
3. What do we learn about Offred's past?
4. What do we learn about Serena's past?
5. Why does Offred envy Rita her access to the knife?

### Chapter 9

1. What feelings does Offered have about herself as she remembers of her affair with Luke?
2. How does Offered "make a connection" to the previous Handmaid?

### Chapter 10

1. Why are the words to the hymn *Amazing Grace* now considered subversive?
2. Note the word "things": What sorts of "things" did women used to do, according to Aunt Lydia? What is Aunt Lydia's attitude toward these "things."
3. What began to happen to women that eventually led to the current change in society?
4. How does Offred feel about The Commander?

### Chapter 11

1. What do we learn about the Handmaid system during the scene at the doctor's office?"
2. How do the doctor's sexually-motivated actions seemingly reflect sympathy?

### Chapter 12

1. To what were women vulnerable in bathrooms "before they got all the bugs ironed out"?
2. What is the significance of Offred's thought: "I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely"?
3. Why does Offred wish to think that her daughter died at age five?
4. What associations are aroused by the tattoo on Offred's ankle?
5. What two meanings of the word "compose" is Offred (Atwood) playing with in the last paragraph?

## **Section V: Nap**

### **Chapter 13**

1. Explain what Offred is inferring when she comments: "...boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men."
2. How Janine is victimized in the Testifying? Explain the significance of this passage in regards to how Handmaids should view themselves as women.
3. How has Offred's attitude toward her body changed?
4. What do her dreams about her husband, Luke, and daughter have in common?

## **Section VI: Household**

### **Chapter 14**

1. Compare Offred's want to "steal something from this room," and Nick's actions "moves his foot so it's touching mine again." How do reflect similarities between them?
2. How does the TV New (Media) affect the manner in which the people of Gilead should view the war?
3. Where are the battles taking place? Who are the armies, and what is significant about their names?
4. We are finally told that the narrator is called "Offred," though it isn't her real name. What is the significance of Handmaid's not using real names in Gilead?

### **Chapter 15**

1. Why is the Bible kept locked up?
2. Explain how Offred views The Commander as series of as phallic images. How does define a man's role as seen through the eyes of women?
3. At the end of the chapter, the Commander reads from the Bible, Second Chronicles 16:9. Why is this verse significant toward the beliefs of Gilead and toward what is getting ready to happen after dinner?

### **Chapter 16**

1. Why is The Ceremony not considered making love? Copulating? Rape?

### **Chapter 17**

1. What is the significance Offred's need to steal butter?
2. What is Offred's impulse reactions to Nick's kissing her?

## **Section VII: Night**

### **Chapter 18**

1. What is Offred's deepest desire? And does it matter with whom?

## **Section VIII: Birth Day**

## Chapter 19

1. What are the odds that any baby will be seriously deformed? What has caused this situation?
2. What information is revealed about birthrates and the need Gilead's new laws?
3. How do the Wives view and interrelate to one another? Do you think this is normal reactionary behavior or are the Wives also "conditioned" like the Handmaids?

## Chapter 20

1. Consider the two types of movies (depicting women in primitive societies and women in pornographic scene), and Aunt Lydia's argument: "Consider the alternatives... You see how things used to be." What aspects of Gilead are positive for women vs. the women depicted in these movies?
2. What are the main tensions between Offred and her mother? Why did Offred rebel against her mother as a young woman? How does she feel about her mother now?

## Chapter 21

1. Explain how the birthing allows all the women of various statuses to connect as one unit?
2. Note the reference to a "women's culture" at the end of the chapter which refers to certain kinds of feminists who have argued that women possess superior values and could build a superior society. What is Offred's attitude toward this idea?

## Chapter 22

1. In what way is Moira a "loose woman" (note the pun)? How is she both a hero and a threat to the rest of the Handmaids?

## Chapter 23

1. What are Offred's intentions as stated in the first two paragraphs?
2. Explain Offred's thoughts on forgiveness and control? How is this connected to the theology of the Bible?
3. Playing scrabble seems like an absurdly trivial form of transgression; why is it significant in this setting?
4. Note Offred's "intended reaction" (violently stabbing the Commander) when he asks her to kiss him, and her actual reaction (kissing him). Explain how Atwood has stylistically used Offred's point-of-view in a unique manner to add suspense to the narrative.

## Section IX

### Chapter 24

1. How does Offred interpret Aunt Lydia's teachings about men?
2. How does story about death camp commander's mistress relate to Offred and her own situation?
3. What is the significance of Offred's sudden need to laugh? Why does she stifle it?
4. How does Offred describe the sound of her beating heart? What imagery comes to mind from this description?

## **Section X: Soul Scrolls**

### **Chapter 25**

1. Consider the egg motif. Explain the significance of how it is used at the beginning of this chapter.
2. Consider the flower motif. Explain the significance of how it is used in this chapter.
3. Why does Offred covet Serena Joy's shears? What do these occasional dark comments tell us about the state of her mind underneath her usual bitterly sarcastic narrative?
4. Women's fashion magazines such as the Commander shows Offred were once the target of fierce criticism from feminists. What does she say these magazines once offered? How do the pictures of the women impress Offred?
5. What is significant about The Commander not knowing the conditions Handmaids must live in.

### **Chapter 26**

1. List the different feeling Offred experiences after the new arrangements with The Colonel. How has she changed from the first Ceremony (sexual encounter)?

### **Chapter 27**

1. What is ironic about the Soul Scrolls store and the types of merchandise the store used to sell?

### **Chapter 28**

1. Consider how Moira criticizes Offred for "stealing" Luke and how did Offred defends herself by saying that she's in love. Do you think the sanctity of marriage should outweigh love, or should love outweigh the sanctity of marriage? Explain.
2. Why did Offred find her mother embarrassing when she was an adolescent? How has her attitude changed now?
3. Why was Offred afraid to ask Luke how he really felt about her losing her job?

### **Chapter 29**

1. Notice Offred's description when she holds a pen her hands and explain the significance of the pun "Pen Is Envy" at it relates to the moment.
2. When the Commander reveals that previous Handmaid had killed herself because "Serena found out," what does this infer?
3. How does Offred now hold "power" over The Commander?

## **Section XI: Night**

### **Chapter 30**

1. Note that The Lord's Prayer is satirized in this chapter. Describe the tone of this version of the prayer, using specific lines to support your analysis.

## **Section XII: Jezebel's**

### **Chapter 31**

1. What has changed about the holidays the Fourth of July and Labor Day?
2. Why do think Serena offers to help Offred get pregnant, even it if means by secretly arranging for Offred to have sex with Nick? Does this change your own perspective of Serena?

### **Chapter 32**

1. \*See question #1 under Chapter 34 below. After you read Chapter 34, refer back to this chapter to respond.

### **Chapter33**

1. What is Offred's attitude toward Janine? Is it valid? Explain.

### **Chapter 34**

1. (Reread Chapter 32). What is your reaction to The Commander's thoughts over why Gilead had to change the rights of men and the rights of women. Do you agree or disagree with any of his reasoning to a certain extent? Explain.

### **Chapter 35**

1. Note Offred's comments on love. How do the laws of Gilead affect the concept of love?
2. Is the Commander not abiding by the laws of Gilead, as it pertains to love? Is Offred? Explain.
3. In the next to the last paragraph, what does Offred mean when she says she has been "erased"?

### **Chapter 37**

1. What is the Commander's rationale for the existence of places like Jezebel's? Do you find him to be hypocritical? Explain.
2. The Commander explains that some of the women there include former prostitutes, a former sociologist, a business executive, and a lawyer, and "they prefer it here... to the alternatives." Given the nature of Gilead, to you agree with this rationale? Explain.
3. What might be Offred referring to when she states: "Girls dressed for Easter, in rabbit suits"?

### **Chapter 38**

1. According to Moira, what kind of work do the women in the Colonies do?
2. What does Moira say the advantages are in working at Jezebel's over being a Handmaid?

### **Chapter 39**

1. Compare and contrast how Offred experienced a hotel room affair with Luke (Chapter 9) vs. how she is experiencing the hotel room with The Commander.

## Section XIII: Night

### Chapter 40

1. Note how Offred makes-up differing versions about what happened between herself and Nick. Go back to Chapter 18 to recall how she offered differing versions of what happened to Luke. Why does she feel the need to offer different stories of events? What effect does this have on the narrative?

## Section XIV: Salvaging

### Chapter 41

1. Note how Offred is explaining to us *how* she is telling this story. Is Offred's explanation correct? How does this style of narration affect the overall story?
2. Explain how Offred has changed after she began having regular sex with Nick.
3. Go back to Chapter 18 and reread the passage in which Offred describes her desire to feel a real body. Now read the passage in this chapter in which Offred describes closing her eyes when having sex with The Commander, but she wants to "memorize (Nick), save him up so I can live on the image, later." What is Offred saying about mankind's needs for love and sex?

### Chapter 42

1. Why are the crimes no longer described at "Salvagings"?
2. How is Offred forced to participate (abide) in this Salvaging?

### Chapter 43

1. What does it say about the Handmaids' beliefs when they barbarically attack and kill a man for the crime of rape?
2. Why do think Offred doesn't participate in the attack? After all, she is a Handmaid and abides by many of the rules.

### Chapter 44

1. Why does Offred tell her new companion that she met the former Ofglen in May?

### Chapter 45

1. Offred is now willing to abide by all the rules of being a Handmaid. Why?
2. How do you view Offred now? Is she a weaker or stronger woman than you initially believed her to be?

## Section XV: Night

### Chapter 46

1. How does Nick reassure Offred when the black van comes?
2. Note the offhanded, ambiguous, but emotionally loaded nature of the last line of Offred's narrative, typical of her. How do interpret her words?

## Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*

This is the real end of the story, of course, told as a parody of a scholarly symposium. Note the date, two centuries from now. The title which Offred's narrative has been given resembles those of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: "The Knight's Tale," "The Wife of Bath's Tale." Most SF dystopias end with a heroic conspiracy or uprising leading to the destruction of the evil government which has oppressed everyone. The jarring shift to pretentious scholarly jargon, while amusing to scholars, may be off-putting for most readers; but Atwood is trying to avoid fatalism and sensationalism at the same time. She is also parodying the ponderous, self-conscious attempts of scholars to be humorous. There is a long tradition of "nowhere" names in utopian fiction. "Utopia" means "nowhere" and Samuel Butler called his utopia "Erewhon." The Chair comes from the University of "deny" which is in the country of "none of it." But Gord Turner of Selkirk College comments further on these place names:

The Northwest Territories in Canada as an area has been associated with two large native groups--the Dene (read "Denay") in the Western Arctic and the Inuit in the Eastern Arctic. In fact, the Northwest Territories through referendum (already held) will be divided into two massive land areas known as Denendeh and Nunavut. "Nunavut" means "Our Land" to the Inuit.

So it's quite likely that Atwood meant the University of Denay to be coloured by the Dene and its massive land claims in the 1980s and the huge area to the East of the Mackenzie River Valley known as "Nunavut." That she changed the spelling of "Nunavut" to "Nunavit" is also interesting as "Nuna" still means "land" and "vit" may mean "our land."

Anthropology has traditionally been carried out by whites on minorities. Here an evidently Native American scholar has as her specialty studying whites, a deliberately ironic twist. Other names suggest that this conference is in fact dominated by Native Americans. It is difficult to see how Krishna (the erotic lover in Hindu mythology) and Kali (the also erotic avenging demon slaying goddess) have to do with Gileadean religion, though that may be Atwood's point. Scholars tend to read what they already know into what they are less familiar with. Certainly plenty of scholars have analyzed Krishna as a Christ figure. The reference to the "Warsaw Tactic" is more grim: the Nazis walled up the Warsaw Jews in the ghetto and proceeded to starve most of them to death. The reference to Iran is of course the most pointed, because of that nation's conservative Islamic revolution which involved strenuous demodernizing and drastic restrictions on the freedom of women. The Iranian example is one of the main inspirations of this novel. Given what Professor Pieixoto has to say about the discovery of "The Handmaid's Tale," how drastically would America seem to have changed between the end of the last chapter and now? Anthropologists are famous for their refusal to judge the societies they study. What do you think is Atwood's reaction to this striving for objectivity in the case of Gilead? How do you feel about it? William Wordsworth famously defined poetry as "emotion recollected in tranquillity." Note the allusion. Many details about the Gilead society's policies are revealed here. Atwood takes the opportunity to point to current tendencies which could lead in the direction depicted in the novel. The speaker's jibe at Offred's education is not a comment on women, but the smugly superior observation of a South American mocking the inadequacies of North America, clearly much fallen from its previous dominance. Note the Canadian references in this section. "Participation" would seem to be a scholarly term formed out of "participant execution" to label what Gilead called "salvaging." [Gord Turner](#) points out a parallel term promoted by the Canadian government: "participation" for "participant action." For the scapegoat, see Leviticus 16:10. Prof. Pieixoto's talk is of a type familiar to literary historians: the attempt to connect a the author of a text with some historical person known from other records, particularly in Medieval studies. But for us, the identification is irrelevant, it is the knowledge that Offred survived and the rebellion eventually triumphed that matters. The final call for questions is traditional, of course, but also serves here as an invitation to further discussion of the issues Atwood has raised.